Gap City:
Toward a Minority Architecture in
Xian Cun

by

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Figure 1.1. The typical bags, migrant workers carry when traveling. These plastic woven bags were originally used to transport commercial goods. Also called snakeskin bags because of the patterning.
ABSTRACT

For many cities, their identity is rooted within its shadows. A rushed reform can wipe out the essential culture of a place. Within recent years, the Chinese economy has experienced major growth. The demand for cheap labour has created a new demographic, Migrant workers. Many from rural farmlands seek jobs in major cities. Amongst all the rapid demolition and construction, affordable housing in urban villages is disappearing due to redevelopment.

By analyzing the conditions in an urban village experiencing redevelopment in Guangzhou, XianCun. This thesis set out to explore strategies where architecture can resist, adapt, and remember. Through speculative designs of temporary interventions, and infill structures, the resulting project will use transformative methods to preserve a disappearing culture. A space that promotes integration will be created for migrant workers to inhabit and, another layer to GuangZhou for the locals to discover. A vibrant thread sewing together the gaps in the city.
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INTRODUCTION

- China - 中国 -

China has experienced massive development and changes in recent years. There is rapid growth in the economy and various technological advances, but along with all the positive progressive growth comes a cost. Unfortunately, China is lacking an equally strong cultural foundation for the country to fully flourish. The Communist Party is the main political party in power since the Proclamation of the People's Republic of China by Mao Zedong on October 1st, 1949. The ideology of Communism is the sharing of all possessions and suppressing personal expressions and beliefs. Maoism, a manifesto by president ZheDong Mao was derived from Marxism and, started the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966. The movement started with the destruction of "The Four Olds": Old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits.\footnote{1}{Gerhard K. Heilig "Timeline: Chronology of Key Event," China Profile, Last Modified on October 12, 2013, \url{http://www.china-profile.com/history/hist_list_1.htm}.} \footnote{2}{Ibid.}
This historical event punished all the artists, intellectuals and religious figures, taking Communism to an extreme. It left a mark on the country and its people. In a way Chinese culture took a pause and continues to have difficulties bouncing back ever since. Through the Chinese Reforms in 1978, was when the government loosened its grip and made property permits available for purchase. The economy started to shift into Capitalism. 3

This opened the country to foreign investment and gave permission for entrepreneurs to start private businesses. Southeastern part of China and its major cities started to rapidly expand, whereas the surrounding rural farmlands remained stagnant in economic growth (Figure 1.2). The abundance of businesses and factories means a large demand for cheap labour. Many people migrated from rural areas, with limited job opportunities and flooded into metropolises to earn a living. This creates the phenomenon of migrant workers. Cheap labour is also exported and people are shipped abroad.

3 Ibid.
This exponential growth also meant urban developments, and large-scale constructions happened quickly. Highrise apartment buildings appeared in the skyline built within a matter of 19 days⁴, and railway stations were completed in as little as 9 hours.⁵ The wave of the new crushed and cleared significant portions of the old cities. Many characteristics of the major Chinese cities that were deemed unpleasant were wiped out by the Chinese Utopian dream of a Westernized city. An area can be transformed completely, and become unfamiliar, within a year.

Mainly the southern parts of the country were exposed to the western influence early in the late 1800s with major trade at the ports of Shanghai. The economy boom in the late 1900s and then since 2010 has catapulted the major cities into a completely different context. In this growth, there was not enough time to adjust to the massive increase in resources. The “Westernization” of China sped up since the 2008 Olympics, to display a polished image of the capital Beijing to foreign visitors. The garbage, the old buildings, the beggars, and street vendors were all swept away. The streets were cleaned carelessly.

The cost of living in the first-tier cities is increasing at a staggering rate. The price of housing has been driven higher by those that purchase properties for investment. The average working class is unable to afford an apartment unit without funds from parents. It is also the cultural norm, for the adult male to own property to prepare for marriage. "The housing sector is now one of China’s main pillars of growth." Unfortunately, this is also a hotbed for corruption. It is an unspoken rule for the developers to bribe officials to gain support for future projects. Meanwhile with the cities’ high density, space is becoming scarce. Therefore, developers resort to gentrification of older residential areas and urban villages. The residents are forcefully bought out often with violent methods. Luckily, there is change for the better with new policies introduced by President Xi Jinping. A price cap has been put in place for the housing market, strict guideline to inhibit corruption, and laws in place that prevent the ruthless actions by developers.

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Migrant workers are becoming a prominent demographic, due to the high demand for cheap labour in cities. In two decades, people from lower-tier cities and rural farmland flood into cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou amongst others, in search of jobs. In these cities, the “number of migrants grew by 400,000 to 500,000 a year in the past decade.”7 (Figure 1.4). Regardless of the increasing population, their original identity as second-class citizens remain. “While migrant workers are labelled as ‘important’, actually they’re still in a weak position in society. Most of today’s migrant workers are still helpless urban vagrants and their humble identity does not seem to have been completely changed.”8

“It must be acknowledged that urban society does not listen to the voices of migrant workers – rather, it ignores or even doubts them.” 9

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9 Ibid.
The migrant worker phenomenon is reflected in the increasing number of people living outside of their Hukou (Figure 1.3). Hukou is an identification of residency in China, defining the region to which one belongs. Gaining Hukou in major cities allows access to more job opportunities and better education for children. In the past, it also classified people into urban or agricultural groups. This distinction has been removed, but it is still region specific. This "only makes a difference on paper. The real difference will be made when the gap in terms of social benefits is filled...There's still a long way to go before there is an equalized social security net among different regions. The fundamental solution is to unify social security [nationwide]."  

Before 2000, migrant workers would leave their families, seek work elsewhere, and the majority would ultimately return to their rural homes. From 2010 onwards, many of the younger generation rural residents have the intention to leave the rural farmlands altogether. They look to settle down in the metropolis and change their *Hukou* for a better future. One option available to them is the College Entrance Exam; another route is to be a migrant worker. Most new migrant workers are faced with many difficulties because they don’t have adequate knowledge of farming techniques to make a living back in the rural farms while also suffering from the struggles to survive in the city.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Radio Free Asia, “The second generation of migrant workers are in a dilemma: they can’t return to the countryside and can’t integrate into the city,” Last Modified August 09 2008, https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/2-08092008091248.html.
The most disheartening struggle of migrant workers is being refused pay. There are many cases, where projects unexpectedly terminate the workers who are let go without any compensation. According to the Hong Kong based NGO China Labour Bulletin, on April 18 2016, hundreds of workers went on strike at SAE Magnetics in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, after the company announced the closure of one of its departments, threatening the livelihoods of hundreds of workers. Before taking to the streets, the workers had demanded that they receive their legally-entitled compensation but had received no response from management.\(^2\)

There’s a phenomenon called “ChunYun” during holidays such as Chinese New Year. Large groups of people flood to train stations or bus stops, in order to return home to reunite with their families (Figure 1.4). There were an estimated to be 2.99 billion passengers in 2019.\(^3\) This creates the problem of a shortage of tickets resulting in raised ticket prices. Therefore, many migrant workers are unable to return home year after year during the New Year celebrations. Those that are stuck in the city gather together to celebrate (Figure 3.10).

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\(^3\) CCTV, “The Spring Festival in 2019 is expected to send 2.99 billion passengers. 200 million tickets have been sold.” Last Modified January 08, 2019, http://m.news.cctv.com/2019/01/08/ARTIe53YdCfoJX1KBN7qRAB190108.shtml
Starting out, many migrant workers cannot afford decent shelter. The worst conditions consist of workers living on the construction site where they work, in make-shift tents or within the building materials (Figure 1.5.C). The few areas providing cheap rentals are called Urban Villages (Figure 1.5.F). They are areas avoided or deemed unpleasant by the average locals. Unfortunately, over the years the value of housing skyrocketed. The price of rentals in urban villages increased significantly and became unaffordable to most migrant workers. The majority of these urban village rentals located close to the city core are due for demolition in the next few years as many villagers that are shareholders await redevelopment for profit.  

The government has very few policies set up to aid the problems the migrant workers face. In recent years, well-established development companies have provided temporary shelters in portable prefab structures on site, constructed with mostly reusable materials such as light frame steel and composite sandwich panels. They can be easily assembled, disassembled and moved to another site. (Figure 1.5.E). A room can be as small as 26 square meters, occupied by as many as 12 people on bunk beds. Each person only has two square meters. These spaces are also poorly insulated, thermally and acoustically. (Figure 1.5.D). In peripheral regions, migrant workers have formed villages with these types of structures. But, once the project is completed and the shelter is disassembled, the workers are once again rendered homeless.
Figure 1.5. Migrant Workers’ various type of shelters


E - Prefab Shelters. Product provided by Tianjing Reihong SteelFrame Engineering Limited http://www.caigangganggou.com/m/a/huodongfang/

INITIAL SPECULATION

After investigating the current conditions in China, possible solutions are explored in the following initial speculations - an attempt at resolving issues regarding migrant workers, rapid demolition of relatively new constructions and the empty pockets between buildings in older residential neighborhoods. The first issue of high demand for housing in these major cities is driving their prices substantially higher, limiting the number of affordable rentals for people with lower income, mainly migrant workers and new university graduates. They are only able to rent in locations far from the city center or in relatively substandard and dangerous areas in conditions found in urban villages.
Secondly, the high rate of demolition of buildings that are only a few years old, or cases where the construction was never completed due to lack of investment. This thesis explores the possibility to make use of all the materials, instead of creating more waste. To “quarry” the materials and disassemble the building piece by piece, instead of pure demolition is one option. Thirdly, the empty underutilized spaces between buildings in older residential areas: all the newly developed areas are walled off from the public, whereas the older residential units have a gap between buildings that cannot be used as public space and therefore only collects garbage. Potentially, demolished materials can be broken down into pieces and reconstructed in the gap spaces between older residential areas this could accommodate some of the demand for housing people with lower income. (Figure 2.1).
Figure 2.1. Inhabiting “gap spaces”

- Pieces of concrete are cut from the buildings due for demolition.
- Floors and roofs are adjustable, and can be manipulated to change the spaces.
- Become invisible to the pedestrians passing by once the floors are pulled up.
- Notches and cuts can be used for assembly.
- Using clips or fasteners to “sew” or tie together the concrete pieces.
- Existing building.
- Farm/garden.
- Strings or ropes on pulleys.
- Pieces of “quarried” demolished materials.
- Retractable stairs/entrance.
- Gap spaces: Empty Lots/Dead Spaces.
- Existing building.
Guangzhou is also known as Canton, the provincial capital of Guangdong. It is also called YangCheng, meaning the Goat City, originating from an ancient legend where five goats gifted by an immortal being saved the city from a long drought. It is currently one of the most influential amongst the first-tier Chinese cities. In history, it was a major terminal in the Maritime Silk Road, and it continues to be one of the major transportation hubs for foreign trade. The Zhujiang or Pearl River which flows into the city and was the major trading route - cargo ships still sailing the river. Since the emergence of economic reform, the entrepreneurial spirit has been more vibrant in the Southern parts of China, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen being the hubs of private enterprises.

The Pearl River is also a key factor that determines the value of a property. Districts close to the shore with a river view are deemed more desirable. Properties close to the northern shore of the northern stream are more valuable than the areas close to the southern stream. This has caused a cluster of high-rise buildings to line the peripheral of the river, blocking the river views for the inland developments - in some cases, causing air circulation problems and hence contributing to greenhouse effect.15

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The Western region of GuangZhou the oldest part of the city – was originally called XiGuan, now LiWan district.\textsuperscript{16} The city is rapidly expanding eastward. For the longest time, since the Qin Dynasty (221-207BC) until the early 2000s YueXiu district has been GuangZhou’s city center.\textsuperscript{17} More recently, TienHe district has developed into the new city center, with the GuangZhou TianHe CBD (Central Business District) at the heart of it. The landmark structure the GuangZhou Tower and HuaChengHui (The Mall of the World), marking the central axis of the city.\textsuperscript{18} (Figure 3.1). Currently, the city is expanding even further east into HuangPu District and further South into HaiZhu and PanYu District below the Pearl River. There are many urban villages in these regions, but they have either been demolished or are due for demolition.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} YueXiu District Official Website, Accessed December 26, 2018, http://www.yuexiu.gov.cn/
\textsuperscript{19} WangYi, “Guangzhou 9 billion development This year’s key projects are here!”, Last Modified November 20, 2018, http://bendi.news.163.com/guangdong/18/1120/18/E12U761004178D6J.html
There are tenement buildings, built in the late 19th century, in Hong Kong, Macau, southern China and Taiwan - designed for both residential and commercial uses - traditionally, the first level consists of commercial spaces that are set back to create an exterior canopied arcade for the pedestrian to shop while being sheltered from the rain – a benefit since many of these cities have heavy rainy seasons and the typhoon threat. The level above is for the owner and additional levels are rented out. The third or fourth level usually has a walkout balcony. The wall enclosing the balcony is called the “daughter wall”, with cutouts that function to lessen the dangers and damages from typhoon (Figure 3.3). These designs originated in the LingNan region in Guangdong due to constant rain. The building type has then become prevalent in Guangzhou. The ZhongShan 4/5 Lu in the past was described as a dragon going through Guangzhou. The design evolved 100 years - the structure and spaces are based on the golden ratio. Nowadays in Guangzhou, many buildings are protected as heritage buildings, and the streets have become solely pedestrian shopping streets. (Figure 3.2).

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Figure 3.2. A schematic diagram of the current status of the Guangzhou Arcade (2014), with the street map dated 37th year of the Republic of China (1948). Image created by ShengJie Xu, distributed by Wikipedia. 
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tenement_houses_in_Canton.jpg
Figure 3.3. Qi Lou
Original image distributed by XiaoMeng, Li, on SinaNews.
QiLou used to be inhabited by people who were merchants with a decent amount of wealth. The older style of residential buildings, occupied by the average working class in the past, is called TongZi Lou. In Guangzhou, many such TongZi Lou are located behind QiLou. One to two-story residential buildings for large three generation families. The footprint is narrow, so the spaces are laid out in a line connected by a single corridor. \(^{23}\)

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The best preserved QiLou are in the western areas of Guangzhou, mostly along ShangXiaJiu, a pedestrian street in LiWan district. (Figure 3.1 & Figure 3.2). Filled with old restaurants that have been in business for over 10 years or more (Figure 3.5 & Figure 3.6). The commercial spaces are very narrow, with vendors with carts tucked away in narrow alleys. There are also creative merchants that use the staircases to display their merchandise. Unfortunately, many QiLou has been demolished or modified (Figure 3.2). One of the most historically valuable QiLou streets LiuErSan Lu was quickly demolished within a week. Government officials deemed them to be too old and worthless, hence they set out to wipe out these important historic streets to make way for the new subway system. 24

The most common method of QiLou modification is constructing a new façade over the existing building. An example being Beijing Lu. (Figure 3.7) where certain QiLou buildings have a LED or illuminated billboard advertisements built over the original building. Larger commercial spaces are created combining the first floor of multiple buildings. Near the northern end of Beijing Lu lies a large patch of the historic street paving preserved under glass panels (Figure 3.8). However, each development defaces the historic buildings and the QiLou street is rendered unrecognizable.

Figure 3.5. ShangXiaJiu Road
Original Photograph distributed by GZShopper

Figure 3.6. YinJi Vermicelli Roll Shop
Original Photograph distributed by GZShopper
Figure 3.7. Beijing Lu
Original Photograph distributed by Expedia.
https://www.expedia.mx/fotos/delta-del-nó-de-la-
perla/canton/calle-peatonal-beijing-road.d6209409/

Figure 3.8. Beijing Lu
Original Photograph distributed by Wikipedia.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beijing_
Road_in_Guangzhou.jpg
There are two types of property occupancy in China: Government-owned land, and Farmer’s collective ownership. Most urban land is owned by the Chinese government. The rural land is owned collectively by farmers. This type of land is divided amongst the members who each holding a share. As the city such as GuangZhou started to expand, the government purchased the surrounding rural land from farmers. The residual land then began to form Urban Villages, plots of rural land surrounded by the city inhabited by low-income migrant workers and new university graduates.\textsuperscript{25}

Legally the villagers are only allowed to build to five stories, but many villagers built more levels to earn more rent. When the government buys them out, villagers are paid based on the owned floor area for people that are within the five stories limit. In the media, it is claimed that there are many cases where villagers have become millionaires or billionaires after the government compensates them with money or with units in new apartment buildings. But after much research, I have learned that there are many villagers forced however to agree to unfair contracts. Additionally, the villagers who are not shareholders, purely renting as tenants are not considered for any compensation. Even though they are faced with the most difficult situation.

It is well known that corrupt government officials receive massive amounts of profit. The XianCun situation is a clear example of this. The people who refuse to leave are fighting for a fair compensation, to afford another place to live in a city with limited cheap places to rent. With the urban villages disappearing, there are very few affordable places for migrant workers. Looking at the past events of XianCun since 2010 there have been numerous protests resisting the demolition and redevelopment plans put forth (Figure 3.16). Many Urban Villages have been added to the list of redevelopments projects and face the same fate (Figure 3.9).

Figure 3.9. Urban Villages scheduled for demolition in central districts
Image distributed by KuaiBao.
http://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20180927A0FIHU00?refer=spider

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28 Guangzhou Real-estate News, " 1/3 of the new construction will used "old land" 64 projects to come, the property price starts from 20,000 yuan per square meter," KuaiBao, http://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20180927A0FIHU00?refer=spider
Figure 3.10. XianCun during Chinese New Year
Original Photograph distributed by HRCChina.

Figure 3.11. XianCun
Original Photograph by ZhangYi Photography
Distributed by HuaWen Net.
https://www.cnread.news/content/1171620.html

Figure 3.12. XianCun
Original Photograph by ZhangYi Photography
Distributed by HuaWen Net.
https://www.cnread.news/content/1171620.html
Figure 3.13. XianCun
Original Photograph distributed by WangYi. [Link](http://money.163.com/photoview/0BGT0025/29189.html)

Figure 3.14. XianCun
Original Photograph by ZhangYi Photography Distributed by HuaWen Net. [Link](https://www.cnread.news/content/1171620.html)

Figure 3.15. XianCun
Original Photograph by ZhangYi Photography Distributed by HuaWen Net. [Link](https://www.cnread.news/content/1171620.html)
Figure 3.16: XianCun Time Line 1980 – 2000

During the period of reform throughout China, the villagers developed various private businesses, especially PIG FARMS.

1980

The whole village privately raised pigs.

1981

The city experienced rapid EXPANSION eastward.

1990

The cultivated land in XianCun was completely REQUISITIONED. The villagers either moved further out to rural lands, or went out to work in various industries. Due to the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, many businesses fell into a wave of BANKRUPTCY. A large number of workers were laid off and unemployed. The TianHe District Government has given villagers a series of welfare benefits, including financial SUBSIDIES.

1994

This complicated the situation of the identity of these returned villagers. According to the regulations, they will not be able to enjoy the benefits like the other residents of XianCun. This divided the demographic into "COMMUNITY SHAREHOLDERS", the ones residing in XianCun, and "SOCIETY SHAREHOLDERS" who are new returnees. They are given less benefits and influence. Both parties attempted to increase their own gain causing delays to the reconstruction process.
The overall RE-DEVELOPMENT work of the village has officially launched. It is planned to complete in three and a half years.

2009.07.10

The village held a shareholder congress and voted on the compensation and resettlement plan for the overall reconstruction and demolition of XianCun.

2010.02

Surroundings have been transformed into Skyscrapers / High-rises
At night, nearly **1,000 VILLAGERS PROTESTED** against reconstruction. Police intervened and added to the chaos. There were rumors of **POLICE BRUTALITY**.

The next morning houses were **FORCEFULLY DEMOLISHED**.

A small number of unsigned villagers and the demolition team were involved in **VIOLENT ALTERCATIONS** attempting to stop demolition.
Figure 3.19, XianCun Time Line 2013 - 2016

The State Council Correctional Office intervened and the demolition work was SUSPENDED. From the date of the shutdown to the end of November, no one signed a new contract.

Resident left bloody with head injury

Sign-ages saying “Stop demolition of Xian Cun”

The first phase of the relocation has started. Soon, due to physical CONFLICTS between some villagers and the security guards, a group of around 200 VILLAGERS PROTESTED on HuangPu Avenue, causing a large negative impact and the DEMOLITION WORK IS POSTPONED once again.

First phase of RE-DEVELOPMENT STARTED again.
Figure 3.20. XianCun Time Line 2017 Onward


Sohu, “Ten Million Rise in Net Worth! The XianCun Villager returned after 9 years! The villagers are moving into ‘new homes’, the first look into the most expensive re-development project in GuangZhou!”, Last Modified January 26, 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/219160955_380672.1


2018.07.22

The village has been DEMOLISHED MORE THAN 70%.

First phase building is open for move in. Construction starting for 3rd phase building.

2018.07.12

XianCun SHAREHOLDERS MEETING, with 4000 people attending. Village officials promises 100% re-development, and set up plans to negotiate with opposing nail households.

2018.01.25

LOTTERY CEREMONY, eligible XianCun shareholders line up at 4am for a chance to win units in the new apartment buildings.

A lucky shareholder scoring 4 units

2018.01.22

XianCun 1st & 2nd phase Reconstruction Buildings Lottery Ceremony

Banner saying “Same wish same morals, Early Return Home”

2018.01.10

10. 30

2018.01.07

01. 22

2018.01.07

2017

Figure 3.21. XianCun Time Line 2017 Onward


Sohu, “Ten Million Rise in Net Worth! The XianCun Villager returned after 9 years! The villagers are moving into ‘new homes’, the first look into the most expensive re-development project in GuangZhou!”, Last Modified January 26, 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/219160955_380672.1

- Middle Ground -

After analyzing the series of past events in XianCun, it became clear that the gentrification of XianCun is already an inevitability. The first site specific speculation for XianCun is a hypothesis for an alternative method of development to satisfy the expansion of the city, to increase density and the demands for affordable housing for the residents of XianCun. Buildings remaining in XianCun can be tucked beneath future developments. This is an opportunity to create a mixed-use development while preserving the remaining urban villages (Figure 4.2). The addition of a green roof can create a necessary separation between the old and future neighborhoods while providing a public space for the different demographics to interact. Cutout skylights and lighting on the green roof will provide illumination to the streets in XianCun (Figure 4.3). The demolished areas can also be public spaces or developed into commercial spaces and farmer’s markets accessible to all.
Highrise Buildings within close vicinity to the urban village

Figure 4.1. XianCun Axonometric Drawing
Figure 4.2. XianCun Speculations Elevation

Superimposing the highrises onto the urban village

Demolished area occupied as public area

Perserving urban village under the green roof with highrises above
The demolition alters the indoor and outdoor spaces.

Promoting the integration of migrant workers into the rest of the city, by superimposing the highrises onto the existing urban villages.

Openings on Green Roof to raise the streets and the spaces between buildings in Urban Villages.

Figure 4.3. XianCun Speculations
Furthering the initial speculation, let us now look at is the idea of inhabiting the gap spaces within older residential areas in Guangzhou. Similar type of structure can be constructed in urban villages along the narrow streets. From researching the types of historic architectures that exist in Guangzhou there is a common thread: QiLou and TongZi Lou are all narrow structures (Figures 4.4), there are no spaces between the buildings, the individual units are tight against the next sharing the same load bearing wall, thus, creating a continuous façade along the street (Figure 4.5 and 4.6). A similar architectural language can be continued within the gap spaces. The infill structure can sew together the buildings on either side. A metaphorical example of opportunistic living within the cracks is demonstrated by a Banyan tree in Guangzhou, growing through the wall of a building from the ground to the roof (Figure 4.4).
Another possible is the rooftop. In addition, rooftop billboards located on residential buildings were banned in Guangzhou since April 1st 2012, opening up more spaces for rooftop dwelling units. There can be a shared structural system between the infill structure and the rooftop units, allowing them to hang instead of interfering with the adjacent load bearing walls of existing buildings. The residential units can be formed by inserting removable containers within the existing structural system. The infill structure can now be off the ground. Further, the residences will have fire escape ladders allowing dwellers to enter and exit the structure. This creates a tunnel for pedestrians to flow through. There can be commercial spaces directly above, therefore the interactions will be vertical. The vendors can display merchandise hanging along the wall of the tunnel or from above.
ROOF TOP UNITS are added to apartments, they usually offer cheap rentals. This is typical in Guangzhou for the older 4 story apartments.

Starting on April 1st 2012, Guangzhou has banned all BILL BOARDS installed on top of residential buildings.

50 year old BANYAN TREE grows out of and through wall of residential apartment building along Beijing street in Guangzhou.

One bedroom residential unit

One bedroom residential unit

Four bedroom residential unit

Qilou Owner’s
Four bedroom residential unit

Commercial Shops

XIAN CUN (URBAN VILLAGE)
Narrow damp pathways that have minimal sunlight and bad cellphone reception.

GAP SPACE
Unused spaces between residential buildings

QI LOU: Tenement buildings

Figure 4.4. GuangZhou: Context Analysis
Figure 4.5. "GapSpace" Speculations - Parti
Figure 4.6. “Gap Space" Speculation
5

URBAN VILLAGE SITE VISITS

- XianCun - 洪村 -

Various types of structures co-exist on site, with visibly different atmospheres from one area to the next. A mixture of remaining nail houses, half demolished or vacant buildings, the newly constructed apartments, and the temporary prefab building for the construction workers. All the buildings that are demolished are piled into mountains of concrete debris. I discovered that even though the site itself is physically deteriorating, the urban village XianCun itself is not, the daily life of the villagers goes on as they - adept changing circumstances. Some take advantage, making use of found materials to hang cloth, collecting materials possibly metal, which can be sold for money. In certain corners, people are going about as if nothing has changed. Children are running, there were a mother and child caring for the garden, a group of middle-aged men are playing Chinese chess are amongst the many signs of everyday life around the urban village as it faces its inevitable demise.
Figure 5.1. XianCun site plan – Aerial View photograph on September 2018, Overlaid with observed and estimated contour of demolished debris during Site Visit on 12.15.2018.

The area is walled off and has propaganda posters along the exterior - all promoting for a better future for Xian Cun. At the entrance, there was a sign saying I must register if I am not a villager. But the volunteers at the office did not bother with procedures and allowed me to enter without restriction. I attempted to speak to certain villagers regarding their current condition, but many were weary. They asked if I was a journalist, and they kindly refused. There are also guards in certain areas that questioned my purpose for visiting.

I was able to interview a group of migrant workers from HeNan, Mr.Liu spoke on behave of them (Figure 5.2). They are currently renting from one of the villagers that is amongst the shareholders refusing to sign the agreement for redevelopment. They worked at a factory in GuangZhou and have been living in XianCun for many years since they left HeNan. They stated that there are many government employees that would visit the site, and most residents are afraid to cause problems.
The village shareholders that have money all live elsewhere and signed the agreement. The shareholders that still live there are not agreeing to the redevelopment because they are not getting reasonable compensation and many tenants are in support of this decision. It is rumored that a single government official can get a hundred million yuan each from redevelopment projects.

These workers also revealed that before the new president Jinping Xi many demolitions happened because the people were beaten until they agreed to give up on their home. Now, the policy has changed so they cannot be forceful like before. This is the reason for the long delay. They are all faced with the problem of finding a future home because it is hard to find another area cheaper than XianCun, and they cannot afford the rent in other urban villages. They might have no other choice but to leave GuangZhou.
Figure 5.3. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.15.2018

Nail Household - people who refuse to relocate

The demolished materials will be crushed to pave roads

Figure 5.4. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.15.2018

There remains a significant number of people living in XianCun
Figure 5.5. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018

Prefab shelters for construction workers in Xian Cun

Figure 5.6. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018

The nail households next to the newly constructed apartment buildings
Clothes drying rack made from bamboo sticks

Shoring wall to clear areas by retaining demolished material

Scaffolding providing protection to the path below

Figure 5.7. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018

Figure 5.8. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018

Figure 5.9. XianCun Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018
Residents have gardens within the demolished debris

Children playing with bamboo sticks

Fruit and vegetable vendors are seen around the site

Many residents are scavenging for scrap metal, possibly for sale after

The existing buildings and the narrow walkways in remaining urban village
The residential project for LieDe in 2007 is the most well-known example of urban village redevelopment cases. LieDe used to be the poorest area of TienHe district, with the cheapest rent. Now, it is known as one of the most profitable projects, and the parties involved have gained a sizable fortune. It is reported that many residents have become millionaires overnight.\textsuperscript{29} It is also a running meme in popular culture - when people say they are from the village, it is revealed to be LieDe village, which implies hat they are affluent. This has shaped a negative public perception of nail houses in urban villages, such as XianCun.

Currently, the apartment high-rises in LieDe has been deemed a failure. It has created numerous problems caused by the size and density of the buildings. The building type is called PingFengLuo, meaning folded screen buildings, due to the rectangular shape of the building and modular layout. This is problematic because it prohibits proper air circulation and blocks sunlight for surrounding areas.

High-rise Apartment Buildings

Figure 5.13. LieDe Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018

Stone signage constructed in the place of the old signage

Figure 5.14. LieDe Site Visit Photo 12.14.2018
This is one of the oldest urban villages in GuangZhou - located directly north of XianCun. The residents of XianCun will possibly evacuate and relocate to ShiPai. Unfortunately, for many, they are not able to afford the rent. All the buildings are much higher in ShiPai. The major alleyways have ground level commercial shops and restaurants, is approximately three and a half meters wide. There are many little dark and damp alleyways as narrow as two meters, but some have artificial lighting or are illuminated by neon shop signs. The spaces between buildings can be very minimal at around half a meter. There is constant traffic with scooters and trolleys passing. The dense bundles of electrical cables run against the building exteriors. I did receive some questioning stares and looks likely due to my camera and for being an obvious outsider. Regardless, I did not feel worried for my safety. The living environment is not the best in quality, but the atmosphere is relatively lively (Figure 5.15).
Figure 5.15. ShiPai Site Visit Photo 12.20.2018

Buildings are all mostly higher than the allowed 5 stories

Most commercial shops in the first levels have neon sign
TangXia is further east of TianHe, on the periphery of the newly developed city center. It is one of the urban villages that is planned to be purchased by the government and has been scheduled for redevelopment since 2017. There are some posters on the information billboard showing villagers in opposition to the potential redevelopment of the urban village. The general layout is the same as ShiPai with the commercial shop running along major alleyways. The one interesting aspect that made TangXia different is that a large portion of the ground is tiled. All the smaller alleyways are in the process of having exterior ground tiling installed (Figure 5.16). Most, if not all, residential building clusters have heavy duty security doors enclosing an area not accessible to the public, presumably as safety mechanisms. The area in general is well planned and the commercial shops along the edges facing towards the main streets potentially could serve customers coming from outside the village.
Workers are paving tiles in TangXia Cun

Figure 5.16. TangXia Site Visit Photo 12.20.2018
There was no method to track down gap spaces in GuangZhou, the following locations described in the section is encountered by chance. It was clear the general area to explore was the older parts of the city, LiWan and YueXiu district.

My friend, Xue He, who grew up in GuangZhou and lived in the city for 16 years. She guided me through the various tourist destinations and places of interest from her experiences as a local. One of the places were these commercial streets that used to be popular shopping areas amongst students in search of unique styles. The price was cheaper, and they sold merchandise in bulk for boutique owners. Disappointingly, these commercial streets have become seemingly obsolete, with only a few shops open, and minimal foot traffic. Branching off from streets – ZhuangYuanFang and GaoDiJie are various ‘gap spaces hidden in the shadow.
Another area I encountered from exploring the city on foot is the older communities – YuDaiHao, ZhanTangLu and QingLongLi Community. Unlike the newly constructed residential areas, there has minimal security dividing the residential buildings and the public roads. There are ‘gap spaces’ leading into the residential area, and between the buildings.

It is visibly more modernized in the eastern parts of YueXiu district. The roads and highways are elevated on concrete structures, separating vehicles from the pedestrian sidewalk. There are fewer ‘gap spaces’, but there was one along DongChuan Lu. The residents in the buildings have utilized the structure to house plants, and there were people walking across the elevated platform. Unintentionally these areas with ‘gap space’ I encounter are along the Pearl River, meandering from west to east across GuangZhou. All potential spaces to construct the ‘gap city’.
Figure 6.1. GuangZhou Map with explored Gap Spaces
– ZHUANGYUANFANG – 状元坊 –

Commercial streets that used to be a popular shopping area for students or buying in bulk, now becoming obsolete.

Figure 6.2. Gap Space near ZhuangYuanFang Site Visit Photo 12.23.2018
A residential street used to be an ancient river, now a street connecting older residential buildings.
Commercial streets that used to be a popular shopping area for buying lingerie and swimsuits in bulk, now becoming obsolete.
– ZhanTangLu Community – 湛塘路大院 –

Residential area with aged buildings.

Figure 6.5. Gap Space near ZhanTangLu Community Site Visit Photo 12.24.2018
- QingLongLi Community – 青龙里小区 –

Residential area with aged buildings.

Figure 6.6. Gap Space near QingLongLi Community Site Visit Photo
Highway elevated on concrete structures. The pedestrian walkways are lined with low-rise and mixed-use buildings.
EXTENSIVE SPECULATIONS

- Rube Goldberg Machine -

The unique areas of a city can be shaped by a series of events, a chain reaction that is characteristic to the location, demographics and time period. The events surrounding XianCun reflect some of the issues that are specific to major Chinese cities such as Guangzhou. The complicated circumstances in Guangzhou made the simple need for shelter by the migrant workers a complex course leading to design speculations need to be shaped by the current situations and human interactions. The design strategies will be a quick response, a temporary relief, rather than a definitive solution.

The first of the suggested initiatives is anchored by the internal events of the and remaining community still dwelling on site. It will be a closed circuit. There will be minimal influences and assistance from external parties. The structures, shelters, and installation will be realized by the inhabitant and constructed with materials found on site. It is important to not commit the same actions as the condo developers, offering inhabitants superficial assistance for publicity, while destroying their place of belonging, and emphasizing the public image of them being second-class citizens. The aim is to let them voice their own perspectives on the matter and minimize the number of outsiders trying to make interventions.
- Resistance and the Inevitable -

As Lebbeus Woods writes:

“These architects must take the initiative, beginning from a point of origin that precedes anything to be resisted, one deep within an idea of architecture itself. They can never think of themselves as resisters, or join resistance movements, or preach resistance. Rather (and this is the hard part of resistance) they must create an independent idea of both architecture and the world.”

“The idea of resistance, whether political, cultural, or architectural, can only exist where there is an established order. The aim of resistance is seldom to overturn this order, but to provide a place, so to speak, where all who are dissatisfied with it can operate more freely, relieved of a necessity to conform.”

The existence of urban villages is in a way already resistance to the wave of gentrification as the city expands. A protest by the working class against the utopian dream of the rich and powerful. The nail houses are fighting the developers and the government officials buy people out for cheap while pocketing the profit. These speculations are creative ways to aid the resisters’ daily lives by discovering spaces of interaction within the aftermath of demolition. This is “minority architecture”, an opportunity for the specific community to leave their mark in a specific urban village, XianCun, that is inevitably going to disappear.

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31 Ibid.
“There can be no permanent architecture of resistance. Architecture of resistance is hit-and-run architecture. It is guerrilla architecture. Its goals are short-term, immediate. Its ambition is to become manifest, then fade away. When it is gone, the trace it leaves becomes part of the landscape.” 32

“it seeks to be effective in the present, for the sake of those who find themselves without a place to be themselves.” 33

The structures described in the speculation will all be temporary. It will trace the façade of the buildings to capture and retain the narrow ‘gaps’ and walkways characteristic of urban villages. The demolitions in XianCun has created an organic landscape, juxtaposing the surrounding urban fabric. It can be interrupted as a manmade form, similar to those used in the control of natural disasters, such as earthquakes or avalanches. They will become shelters that retain an inhabitable space within the rubble and create entirely different accessible spaces. There is also the possibility where the frame is completely submerged, forming a ghost of the narrow walkways. This is a chance for “architecture to be defensive and reactionary”.

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
My speculation is all based around the people remaining in XianCun. New minority structures can promote their day to day lives, at the same time provide protection, a temporary shield raised over what is remaining of their disappearing home or spaces. They exist in remains. These human interactions are forms of resistance. They will be constructed with materials found on site built, occupied by people on site, and eventually demolished by workers on the site. It is a small gathering of remnants, a contained communal affair. Structures and spaces within it will evolve as the site crumbles down. Once it is demolished and uninhabitable, certain pieces will stay and be buried with the remains of demolished buildings, buried under the brand-new apartments. Certain pieces will leave with the villagers and relocate into gap spaces around the city.
Figure 7.1. Walkway on Demolished Material Speculation

- **Vegetation can grow along the canopy frame**
- **Fabric canopy to provide shelter from sun and rain**
- **Steel, bamboo and wood stilts found on site**
- **Demolished material**
- **Wood or metal planks found on site fastened together**
- **Plastic covered areas that can be used as slides for children**
- **Constructed with found material: rope or wire fastening the walkway onto metal or wooden sticks**
An arcade tracing the exterior of the existing building

Demolished material

Existing Building

Pulley system

Ropes in tension

Existing Building

Anchored in the demolished materials

Existing Building

Rope in tension

Canopy or walkway made of found planks

Walkway made of found planks

Figure 7.2. Walkway on Existing Building Speculation
Figure 7.3. Speculation Drawing on Site Visit Photo
Figure 7.4. speculation Drawing on Site Visit Photo
Figure 7.5, speculation Drawing on Site Visit Photo – Ancestral Shrine
Figure 7.7. Resistance Frames Speculation

- The narrow walkways characteristic to Urban Villages

- Metal frames with wire mesh to retain against the rubble.

- Frames built with found material on site, trace the facade of existing buildings

- The spaces within the frame will transform as the surrounding buildings are gradually reduced to rubble.

- The frame will preserve hollow outline of the walkways.

- At locations where the frame is buried completely by the debris, the quality imitates that of the walkways that are now gone.
Figure 7.8. Speculation Drawing on Site Visit Photo 12.20.2018
- Relocate into Gap Spaces –

The speculations undertaken are a series of reactionary tales. Each a different perspective directed by a new layer of information. After research and analysis, we must accept that the destruction of urban villages is inevitable. This then is a temporary existence for people who are in transition, a minority architecture. Migrant worker is short term identity, they were rural villagers and they will return to rural farmlands or integrate into urban society, similarly nobody is living in urban villages long term.

Continuing the ideas suggested in Sewing the Gap: The people that are evacuated out of XianCun, along with the structures that are removed from the site can settle into the “gap space” between residential buildings. This is an opportunity to form a horizontal system across Guangzhou, all the structures in “gap space” thread together to form a “gap city”. They can be hidden within the existing urban fabric while allowing the structures to blend in with the residential areas. Similar to the fate of urban villages, these old residential buildings will be gentrified into high-rise apartment buildings. This resistance will exist where it is needed and allowed, meandering through the city. Forming An ever-changing vibrant thread sewing together the gaps in the city, when it has finished serving its purpose, it will also disappear.
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